DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 330 468 PS 019 520

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TITLE A Code of Ethics for the Early Childhood Field in Australia.
SPONS AGENCY Melbourne Univ. (Australia). School of Early Childhood Studies.
PUB DATE Apr 91
NOTE 23p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Chicago, IL, April 3-7, 1991).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Child Caregivers; *Codes of Ethics; *Day Care; Early Childhood Education; Foreign Countries; National Surveys; *Preschool Education; *Professional Development; Teacher Attitudes; Teacher Characteristics
IDENTIFIERS *Australia

ABSTRACT

A study examined the ethical dilemmas faced by Australian early childhood professionals. Data were obtained from responses to a questionnaire mailed to 25 preschool centers and 25 child care centers in Western Australia, South Australia, Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria, and the Northern Territory. Of 300 questionnaires mailed, a total of 99 valid questionnaires were returned. Findings bear on three issues in particular: (1) the field's perception of the need for a code of ethics; (2) the low response rate of workers with 6 to 10 years of experience in the early childhood field; and (3) conflicts with parents. Another point for consideration raised by the survey data is the possible inclusion of training in both philosophical and practical ethics in preservice and postgraduate levels for all early childhood workers. (RH)

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# A CODE OF ETHICS FOR THE EARLY CHILDHOOD FIELD IN AUSTRALIA

AERA ANNUAL MEETING
CHICAGO
3-7 APRIL, 1991

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This research was funded by the Research Trust Fund of the School of Early Childhood Studies, University of Melbourne.

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INTRODUCTION:

'Being a competent professional' is a phrase which is certain to grab the attention of everyone within the early childhood field with any sense of work ethic; everyone wants to be perceived as 'professional' in terms of the work they do and everyone needs to be recognised as 'competent' in terms of their approach to that work. However, this notion of being a professional is fairly new to the early childhood field in Australia; the literature is confined mainly to the last two decades and has increased in volume and intensity over the past five years or so. Prior to the 1970's early childhood workers were perceived as female 'do gooders' who cheerfully and enthusiastically 'saved' the nation's poor young children from an uncertain fate for very little remuneration. However the spread of early childhood programs across the total population, together with the development of a range of services for young children and their parents, and finally the acknowledged financial commitment in Australia of government at all levels to these services has meant that the early childhood field has assumed a very different complexion in terms of the personnel operating in the field, the training provided for these people, the services offered and the attitude of the community to this group of unique workers within the last two decades. While it can be argued that a number of crucial issues need to be addressed for the continuing advancement of the early childhood field such as training, the programs it provides for children and accountability, "professionalism" stands out as the essential issue for the 1990's. However there is much debate by sociologists and others regarding the criteria for professionalism, but four agreed upon criteria stand out as being relevant to the early childhood field; firstly, professionals are altruistic; they have a commitment to something beyond their own status and their own self-esteem; a true professional, according to Lindsay and Lindsay (1987), does not keep office hours when there is a need for their services outside those hours.

Secondly, professionals are knowledgeable and skilful; as a result of prolonged training they possess certain demonstrable theoretical knowledge, as well as skills and attitudes which can be readily translated into practical skills which no one else can demonstrate. For the early childhood workers this would imply nurturing, instructional and facilitating skills which are used when working with young children and their families. In addition professional people are recognised as possessing a desire for self enhancement, thus ensuring that these knowledge, attitudes and skills acquired at the preservice level are maintained and continually augmented during the person's period within the profession.

Thirdly, professionals belong to a national body which endeavours to enhance the objectives of the profession. It is interesting to note however that Spodek (1987) has suggested that in order to become part of a profession it is necessary to know its history and traditions. Perhaps this is an area which has almost been forgotten in

preservice programs but which perhaps should be rejuvenated?

Finally, professionals adhere to a workable code of ethics, either created previously by their colleagues such as the medical practitioner's Hippocratic Oath, or a code developed by the person themselves. Feeney and Sysko (1986:15) have suggested that through

> "... a code of ethics, a profession acknowledges its distinctive responsibility towards society."

The important thing about this code of ethics is that it has to be workable, rather than a 'pious, unenforceable code which is a publicity stunt' (Spodek, 1987) and it has to cater for the profession's clients. Presumably the early childhood worker's clients are primarily young children and their families so the code will firstly cover areas such as equity for young children in terms of sex, age, race and ethnic background, a determination to ensure the child is not open to abuse of any kind; secondly a commitment to operate a policy of social justice by offering relevant services to as many families as possible; and thirdly a desire to work with parents and colleagues in a way that will respect their strengths but at the same time assist the young child's development towards independence.

But just what is this nebulous 'code of ethics' which appear to be all things to all people? A code of ethics, whether it applies to a netball team, a management team in a large business corporation or a group of early childhood workers, is a set of value judgements relating to the way in which the person or group should behave in order to uphold or abide by the professional values of that group. As such, it provides a basis for critical reflection upon a person's role as a professional, for argument or action in a professional's life, (Feeney and Sysko: 1986), and as a basis for principles related to their professional role. While many people confuse 'goals' and 'ethics', ethics are, according to Katz, 'statements about how to conduct oneself in the course of implementing goals'. (Katz, 1980:139)

Katz (1980) has expressed the baseline of an ethical code succinctly; a code of ethics would include the beliefs of the particular group about what is right rather than expedient, what is good rather than simply practical, a description of acts which members of the group must never engage in or condone, even if those acts would work or if members could 'get away with them', or acts to which members must never be 'accomplices, bystanders or contributors'. (Katz 1980:139)

The most obvious reason for adopting a code of ethics is that a decision based on a professional code of ethics is less likely to be challenged by members of the profession, and, hopefully by non-members who interact with the particular profession in the course of professional activities. A code of ethics should, therefore, expedite both day to day and long term decision making in that it will help determine what it is that responsible early childhood educators should - and should not - do.

In the light of this statement it would appear that two steps need to be carried out by any professional group in order to develop a relevant code of ethics; firstly to 'ascertain the most frequent and most severe ethical conflicts confronted by practitioners' (Katz 1980:150), and secondly to 'collaborate with philosophers to combine expertise' (Feeney and Kipnis, 1985:56) in order to develop moral standards for our profession. It appears necessary, therefore, to identify ethical dilemmas relevant to the early childhood field in Australia in order to begin the process of developing a code of ethics for the Australian early childhood field.

Because the terms "professional concern" and "ethical issue" or "ethical dilemma" are often used interchangeably in the literature, it may be helpful at this point to clarify the difference between general professional concerns and specific ethical issues. "Professional concerns" can be defined as those crucial issues which need to be addressed in terms of the professionalisation of the field and in order to provide the recognition of children's services as an integral part of the established human services profession. Such general concerns, around which controversy and debate need to be encouraged, are related to early childhood practice (that is, caregiving and teaching functions which facilitate developmental outcomes for children and families), service delivery (that is, prevention and intervention) and the preparation of competent personnel (that is, training and education). On the other hand, the term "ethical dilemma" refers to a specific situation which involves a choice between two or more alternative courses of action (Katz, 1989) in which the choice of one of the alternatives sacrifices the advantages that might ensue if another alternative were chosen. That is, the early childhood professional is faced with a predicament which he or she can resolve only through making a responsible choice or judgement. Ethical dilemmas characteristically involve conflict between two or more core values (Kipnis, 1987). The resolution of such conflicts involve the application of guidelines which have been derived from a code of ethics. The code of ethics needs to have been developed from an ethical analysis which included the identification of core professional values and an analysis of prevailing ethical dilemmas. The present study aims to examine the ethical dilemmas faced by Australian early childhood professionals rather than explore more general attitudes to professional concerns.

## METHODOLOGY

The data for this study were obtained from responses to a mailed questionnaire which was sent to 25 preschool centres and 25 child care centres in each of the Australian mainland states of Western Australia, South Australia, Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria as well as the Northern Territory. The lists of centres to be sampled were provided with the co-operation of the major early childhood training institutions in each of the states and the Northern Territory and were comprised of centres used for practicum placements in each state. The questionnaire and accompanying letter requesting that all staff in paid employment at the centre be provided with an opportunity to complete the questionnaire individually and return it anonymously by mail were developed in and mailed from Victoria. The sample was informed that participation in the survey was voluntary and that staff could choose

not to participate by simply not returning a completed questionnaire.

The ten questions included in the survey were derived from the work of Feeney and Sysko (1986) in conjunction with additional information generously provided by Professor S. Feeney in the development phase of this research. The phraseology of some questions were modified in order to account for cultural and social conditions and to make the language and concepts contained in the survey more in line with Australian conditions and usage. For example, 'knowing that the program is in violation of state regulations' was amended to read 'knowing that the centre/program is in violation of government regulations'; 'staff-agency interaction' was changed to read 'staff-employing body interaction' and phrases such as 'conflicting obligations' and 'curriculum program practice' were expanded to provide more examples while the one word statement on 'whistleblowing' was changed to read 'violation of government/legal regulations or standards that warranted reporting'.

Basically however, the intention was the same; namely to identify the kinds of ethical dilemmas which early childhood workers face and the source of those dilemmas and then to determine whether these dilemmas were 'situation-specific', i.e., whether conflicts reported by centre based child care workers were similar to or different from those of people working in kindergartens or other areas of children's services; whether there were more ethical dilemmas present in some relationship dimensions than others, e.g., do parents/staff interactions generate more dilemmas than staff/staff interactions, and finally to determine the ways in which early childhood workers typically resolve their ethical dilemmas and what is the basis for that solution?

Of the 300 centres sampled throughout the Australian mainland, valid questionnaires were returned by 99 centres. Table 1 describes the percentrage of responses across mainland Australia

(Insert Table 1 here)

It may be interesting to speculate on the high level of response rate from respondents in the more distant states of Western Australia, Queensland and the Northern Territory when compared to those states closer to Victoria, the state where the survey originated. Perhaps fewer opportunities for professional contact with colleagues as a result of distance and/or isolation stimulated greater interest in and consequently response to the survey. In any case, the percentage of responses compares favourably with the data from the Feeney and Sysko (1987) survey (600 responses from a potential pool of forty-five thousand NAEYC members).

## THE SAMPLE

Table 2 summarises the profile of the respondents providing background details about the type of early childhood worker who is interested in and concerned about professional issues.

(Insert Table 2 here)

The sample appears representative of the gender distribution of early childhood workers in Australia with the vast majority of respondents being female (94.9%) compared to male (5.1%). It is interesting to note that 40.4% of respondents indicated that they came from the under 30 years age group with the majority of respondents (59.6%) coming from the over 40 years age group. This would suggest that older and possibly more experienced workers are interested in and concerned with ethical issues. Yet, when age is compared to length of experience in this study, 45.4% of respondents indicated that they had between one and five years experience with 37.4% having eleven or more years experience. A possible explanation for this discrepancy may be that many women in the sample have either stayed at home or left the work force to have families and returned to employment when the youngest child started school. If this is the case, there are certain implications for the professionalisation of the early childhood field in Australia. While this pattern of employment is quite acceptable, it may mean that many women working in early childhood have financial rather than career priorities and may see their job and role quite differently from a career-oriented person. In addition, the focus and emphasis in the early childhood field in Australia has shifted over the past decade. Consequently, time out or a break from the profession may result in lack of familiarity with current developments in the early childhood field. However, in describing their previous employment experience, only 10.1% specified family duties. The wording of this question may not have accessed accurate data on time away from employment in order to raise a family.

The findings on length of experience coupled with the data which indicate that 63% of respondents have previously worked in areas other than early childhood provide further evidence that many workers come into the field at a later age. It is deceptive to equate age with work experience because any intermission in professional experience, to become a parent or for other reasons, interrupts the sequence of professional development suggested by Katz (1972), and is likely to result in a lack of confidence for embracing changes which have occurred while out of the workforce.

The majority of respondents (83.8%) indicated that they possessed qualifications relevant to the early childhood field. Of these, 39.4% held child care qualifications, 25.2% early childhood teaching diplomas, with the remainder holding Bachelor of Education (early childhood and primary) and other qualifications. Only 19% indicated that they were currently studying which is disappointing in terms of the sample's age and existing qualifications. The data suggest that professional renewal is not a priority for the respondents which is not the case with the data from Feeney and Sysko's American survey.

The respondents indicated that they were generally full-time workers (77.8%) rather than part-time workers (14.1%), with 26.3% employed in child care and 30.3% employed in kindergarten. The phrasing of the question provided difficulties for the coding of data because the specified categories were not discrete. Of the 19.2% who

categorised themselves as "Administrator", it is not known whether these respondents work in child care or in kindergarten. Similarly, of the 21.2% of respondents who indicated that they held "multiple roles", it was not possible to determine whether these roles were in child care or kindergarten or even elsewhere. It is possible that respondents interpreted the term "multiple roles" to mean "teacher-director", thereby indicating that their role involved both work with children and administration. The terminology and job descriptors need to be clearly defined and specified in any future research in order to obtain accurate information about the current employment status of such a sample.

The sample included respondents who were employed at state-funded centres (28.3%), federally-funded centres (18.2%), centres with multiple sources of funding (23.2%), private profit centres (3.0%) and local council funded centres (1.0%). This question drew "No Response" from 11.1% of respondents. One wonders whether such a large group could be unaware of the source of funding for their centre.

Preliminary statistical analyses indicated that no significant differences existed for age, job description, level of training and length of work experience. In addition, no significant statistical differences were found in terms of degree of concern about ethical dilemmas, the incidence and type of ethical dilemma encountered in their work or the importance of the development of a code of ethics. The relatively high percentage of "No Response" encountered in this study has limited the analysis of the data to a descriptive level.

## RESULTS

The respondents were presented with ten questions, six of which consisted of forced choice questions with the remaining four questions being open-ended requiring general comments on ethical concerns and the type of assistance deemed appropriate.

When asked to rate the importance of ethical concerns in the early childhood profession, 58.6% of the respondents regarded the issue as "very important" with a further 30.3% of respondents rating the issue as "important". Only 9.1% responded that the issue was "somewhat important" and 2% did not respond to the question. These data indicate that the overwhelming majority of respondents in this study regarded ethical concerns as an important professional issue.

(Insert Table 3 here)

Following on from this, the respondents were asked to prioritise the development of a code of ethics as a means for setting professional standards for the early childhood field. The findings that 82.8% of the respondents rated the development of a code of ethics as either "essential" (41.4%) or "major" (41.4%) priority is disappointing considering the age and years of experience of the sample. Given that considerable work has been undertaken around Australia on the development of a code of ethics

before this study was conducted, it is likely that respondents were familiar with the concept of a code of ethics. The fact that 14.1% of the sample found a code of ethics to be a minor priority or not a priority at all with a further 3% who did not respond to the question raises some concern about their understanding of the professional role. Further investigation of the data indicated that the majority of respondents who rated this issue as a low priority had eleven plus years of experience whereas those who rated it as an essential priority tended to have one to five years experience. These data lend support to the notion that length of experience may not be a reliable predictor of professional development in the early childhood field in Australia. The findings that less than 20% of the sample were engaged in further study despite the fact that nearly 84% indicated that they were qualified may indicate that their training was completed some time ago prior to the current emphasis on and recognition of the need for professional standards in the early childhood field. These data provide a powerful argument for opportunities for retraining (which exist in other human service professions, for example, medicine, dentistry, law and nursing) in order to help individuals keep up with the latest developments in their field.

When asked to estimate the frequency with which ethical issues were encountered in their work, only 28.3% indicated that these were encountered "very frequently". The majority of respondents indicated that ethical issues were encountered "sometimes" (46.5%), "rarely" (17.2%) and "never" (3.0%) with 5% not responding to this question. These data are surprising given the earlier overwhelming agreement (88.6%) with the importance of ethical concerns in the early childhood field. Displacement may be the phenomenon which accounts for this discrepancy. It appears that, while the respondents believe that ethical issues arise in and are of concern to the field in general, they do not believe that they personally experience many ethical problems.

(Insert Table 4 here)

Further analysis of the data indicated that respondents who actually work with children in daily face to face interaction perceive the need for a code of ethics more than those who work in administrative roles because they encounter ethical issues more frequently in their work. Child care workers with one to five years experience responded more positively to the notion of a code of ethics when compared to administrators with eleven plus years of experience. Respondents with 6-10 years of experience made up only 16.2% of the sample in this study and showed no consistent trends in their attitudes. Perhaps the low level of response from this group can be explained by the fact that women in their late twenties and early thirties intermit from work to raise a family. Alternatively, the lack of response from this group may be explained by "burnout"; a syndrome which includes a degree of apathy about or withdrawal from the professional area as typical characteristics.

When asked to describe the types of ethical issues encountered in their work with children and families, the respondents indicated parental conflicts (26.3%), professionalism (16.2%) and differences in values (11.1%) were the major concerns.

However, 23.2% of the sample did not respond to this open-ended question, perhaps indicating a lack of familiarity with the concept resulting in an inability to generate specific instances.

(Insert Table 5 here)

When presented with a list of ethical issues which had been identified as being of concern to early childhood professionals (Feeney & Sysko, 1986), the respondents indicated that dealing with requests to treat children in harmful or inappropriate ways (45.5%), discussing a child or family in a non-professional setting (40.4%) and implementing policies believed not to be good for children because the program requires them (39.4%) were major ethical issues. Table 6 summarises these data which are consistent with the earlier responses concerning parental conflicts, professionalism and value differences which were spontaneously generated by the respondents.

(Insert Table 6 here)

It is interesting to note that nearly 20% of respondents had previously indicated that they rarely or never encountered an ethical issue and when asked to nominate from the list of critical issues which were of greatest concern to them personally, 22% of respondents provided no answer. This may indicate a lack of understanding of what the term actually means. However, consistent with previous responses, parental conflicts (16.2%), concerns over abuse and neglect (16.2%), administration issues (12.1%) and professionalism (10.1%) were identified as "of greatest concern" by those who did respond.

In an attempt to obtain more detailed information about the type of ethical issues encountered in the early childhood field, the respondents were asked to rate the frequency with which they encountered problems with parents, other staff, the administration, their employer and with other organisations. Table 7 summarises these data which contradict earlier responses in this study and American (Feeney & Sysko, 1986) and other Australian data (Clyde and Rodd, 1989).

(Insert Table 7 here)

In a previous questions when respondents were asked to generate ethical issues which were of greatest concern to them personally, 26.3% reported parental conflicts as of great concern. Yet, in the data concerning how frequently conflict with parents was encountered, 88.9% reported that they sometimes, rarely or never encountered such conflicts. These data raise the question of how the respondents perceive their relationships with parents and interpret their role. This is a critical issue in early childhood care and education where staff are likely to be working closely in partnership with parents over issues which are likely to produce conflict, for example, the use of dummies and bottles, toilet training, solid foods, sleep/eating routines, medication, the definition of a "well child" and management of children's behaviour. It may be that the response to this issue with parents reflects a lack of awareness

and understanding of the interaction process between parents and caregivers.

In generating and describing specific examples of staff-parent conflict, the concerns were specifically described as "conflicts" by 22.2% of respondents with lack of recognition of advice identified by 11.1% of respondents. It is of interest to note that most of the concerns were described as conflicts even though the respondents had previously indicated that conflict occurred infrequently. The data indicate that some respondents are unhappy that parents do not recognise their advice which suggests that either the advice was not seen as relevant or appropriate by the parents or that the caregivers' perceptions of parental reaction to advice stemmed from lack of confidence in their relationship with parents. In either case, the respondents do not appear to perceive their relationship with parents as a type of partnership involving consultation and negotiation.

More detailed examination of the data on staff-staff conflicts indicated a similar trend as that with parents. Previous research (Clyde & Rodd, 1989; Feeney & Sysko, 1986) indicated that staff-staff conflict was a major concern, yet 90.9% of respondents in this study indicated that they sometimes, rarely or never encountered this problem. However, when describing typical incidences in this area, again the word "conflicts" was used by 15.2%, with lack of professional behaviour being identified by 16.2% of respondents. While Feeney and Sysko (1986) found that lack of confidentiality was of great concern, only 2% of respondents in this study identified this example. These data contradict previous responses where professionalism (16.2%), administration (12.1%) and differences in values (11.1%) were perceived as areas of major concern.

Finally, respondents were asked to identify the type of assistance that they would find helpful in dealing with ethical issues encountered in the early childhood profession. While 36.3% of the sample did not respond to this question, of those who did one-third specified assistance through professional associations and another indicated that a code of ethics would be helpful. These data (where only 20.2% of the total sample perceived a code of ethics as being of assistance in this area compared to the earlier response where 82.8% of respondents rated the development of a code of ethics as an essential or major priority) are disappointing and support the notion raised earlier concerning the general professional immaturity of this particular sample. The data from this present study suggest a tendency towards a lack of deeper understanding by the respondents of the relationship of ethical issues to the early childhood context and do not reflect the American data of Feeney and Sysko (1986) which indicated that "ethics is a serious concern for early childhood educators" (1986:20).

## CONCLUSION

There are three areas which are highlighted by this Australia wide survey of early

childhood workers. One is a consideration of the field's perception of the need for a code of ethics. Creaser and Stonehouse (1989) have argued that:

> "a code of professional ethics will provide standards of behaviour for the professionals in the early childhood field". (p7)

In terms of the professionalisation of the field, Vander Ven (1986) argued that it was a code of ethics which set a profession apart from a mere occupation. In this study, while 82.8% of respondents believe that the establishment of a code of ethics is a priority for the early childhood field, only 20.2% of the Australian sample suggested that a code of ethics could be of assistance in dealing with professional concerns and ethical issues. These data suggest that, in Australia, the early childhood field has a way to go before it can be regarded as a profession if we use the development of a code of ethics as a criteria. A large minority of respondents (24.2%) were more interested in greater access to individual assistance provided by a professional association rather than having access to general guidelines for standards of practice which are derived from a code of ethics.

This kind of response has been partially explained by Katz (1977), in her work on teachers' developmental stages. Her argument is that there are at least four developmental stages exhibited by early childhood teachers, each of which has discernible characteristics. In the initial stage, characterised by a preoccupation with survival in the field, necessitates that the early childhood worker receive "support, understanding, encouragement, comfort and guidance" (Katz, 1977:8) and a great deal of on site "hands on" training. The second of Katz's stages, that of consolidation, involves just that; the early childhood worker spends more time concentrating on helping individual children and implementing theoretical knowledge and skills. During these two stages it would not be anticipated that the worker would be concerned with esoteric notions of ethics, values or professional morality. As 41.4% of the Australian sample had been working for less than six years it is possible to argue that these caregivers and teachers are still passing through the basic Survival and Consolidation stages as described by Katz.

However, 36.4% of the total sample had been working 11+ years and therefore should have been demonstrating more of the characteristics of Katz's later stage of teacher development, such as being more receptive to professional roles on a national and regional basis, becoming readers of professional journals and modellers of their programs in addition to demonstrating increasing perceptions about the role of the early childhood worker, the place of early childhood services in the community as well as showing an interest in the way decisions are made. These kinds of activities, demonstrated by professionals at the final stage of Katz's model, Maturity, would be conducive to thinking about a code of ethics, and may be reached by some people within three to five years of entering the profession, according to Katz.

It can be argued that as 24.2% of respondents suggested that they would gain professional support by belonging to professional associations these data may serve

to indicate that some of the respondents in the Australian study were moving towards the two final stages of teacher maturation as described by Katz and were therefore becoming more susceptible to the idea of a professional code of ethics.

A second area of interest is related to the low response rate of people with between six to ten years experience in the early childhood field. While there are a number of possible reasons for this, including the random nature of the actual sampling technique, or the fact that many people within the relevant age range may be rearing children, it may well be that this age is represented disproportionately in the early childhood field due to their leaving the early childhood field altogether. Ryan, (1989) recorded a "burn out" rate of about twenty per cent of child care workers in the state of New South Wales and these results have been reiterated in similar North American studies. These drop out rates, when combined with the small number of respondents who indicated they were undergoing further study, would appear to indicate that while staff do not have sufficient expertise to cope with the ever increasing demands of working with young children, there is not a commitment to the belief that expertise may be developed and enhanced through further study, which is one of the major determinants of a professional, and which may be categorised as a characteristic of Katz's more sophisticated levels of teacher development. This lack of professional maturity was obvious in Clyde's (1989) pilot study of the inservice activities of kindergarten teachers in the Melbourne region. All the teachers surveyed had attended some form of inservice program in the previous two years and all had included attendance at "subject oriented" sessions in areas such as Science, Music and Movement; 45% had attended programs related to behaviour management while less than 20% had enrolled in courses relating to aspects of professionalism. While these results may indicated a "chicken and egg" situation - no one attends professionally-oriented courses, so why offer them - a substantial number in the group (85.7%) indicated they had taught for at least eleven years and it could be assumed that most of these people had reached the final stage of Katz's process, described as :

> "The teacher now has enough perspective to begin to ask deeper and more abstract questions such as, "What are my historical and philosophical roots ... Is teaching a profession?"
>
> (Katz, 1977:11)

In addition, Katz pointed out that teachers at the Maturity stage would find seminars on child development, meeting the needs of individual children, etc. 'very tiresome'. This is an interesting commentary when we look at the kinds of inservice programs undertaken by teachers in this cohort. The pilot study undertaken in Melbourne revealed that a majority of the inservice workshops and seminars attended by teachers at all stages of development catered for participants at the basic Survival and Consolidation stages as described by Katz (1977).

Clearly institutions providing inservice programs, continuing education courses and courses leading to the upgrading of qualifications will need to concern themselves with offering courses which will enable early childhood workers to move towards

consideration of more professional issues, and they will need to address the complex processes of marketing courses such as these if the early childhood field is to undertake the move towards professionalisation.

The third area for consideration from the Australia-wide data indicates that, of those early childhood workers who do have concerns, the issue of greatest concern is generated by "conflicts with parents" over specific policies, parental requests to treat children in ways considered harmful and inappropriate, and handling suspected cases of child abuse and negligence. Staff-parent interaction was rated as the most conflict-ridden relationship in the early childhood field. Ebbeck and Clyde (1988) have suggested that one of the reasons for this staff-parent conflict could be the result of the confusion within the early childhood field relating to their primary commitment; is it to children or to parents? This confusion has been exacerbated by the changing needs and demands of the community and the ongoing debate about whether children's services are primarily for parents or children. While these data reflect results similar to those of Feeney and Sysko (1986) this is not a reason for complacency but a warning for early childhood staff in both countries to relook at the way they interact with parents and the potential for more advocacy activity on the part of staff at all levels.

This points, also, to the necessity of further training in the area of communication and interpersonal skills. The changing nature of families, society and the early childhood worker's role suggests that staff will be required to develop a diverse range of skills, among them a sophisticated competence in interpersonal skills (Rodd, 1987). Skills such as listening, feedback, assertion, conflict resolution and negotiation skills are essential tools for staff when dealing with parents and will be valuable in handling other professional concerns.

A final point for consideration from the data generated by this survey is the possible inclusion of training in ethics, both at the philosophical and practical level, in preservice and post graduate levels for all early childhood workers. Such a process would be essential in order to empower graduates by developing their confidence and ability to make appropriate and valid decisions when ethical concerns are present. But in any case, Australian early childhood practitioners need to view the adoption of a more assertive position in the area of ethical concerns as part of their roles for and responsibilities towards their consumers in particular, and towards the early childhood field in general otherwise the proposed Code of Ethics may become nothing more than an exercise in semantics rather than a proclamation of a positive commitment to and move towards a more professional status.

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**Table 1**

**Response Rate By State**

| | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| Victoria | 22 | 22.2 |
| Western Australia | 21 | 21.2 |
| Northern Territory | 19 | 19.2 |
| Queensland | 18 | 18.2 |
| South Australia | 11 | 11.1 |
| New South Wales | 8 | 8.1 |
| Total : | 99 | 100.0 |

**Table 2**
**Profile of Respondents' Background**

| Descriptor | | | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Gender | • | Male | 5 | 5.1 |
| | • | Female | 94 | 94.9 |
| Age | • | Under 20 years | 2 | 2.0 |
| | • | 20 - 25 years | 21 | 21.2 |
| | • | 26 - 30 years | 17 | 17.2 |
| | • | 31 - 40 years | 35 | 35.3 |
| | • | 40 plus years | 33 | 33.3 |
| | • | No response | 1 | 1.0 |
| Qualifications: | | | | |
| | • | Qualified | 83 | 83.8 |
| | • | Unqualified | 2 | 2.0 |
| | • | No response | 14 | 14.2 |
| Type of Qualification: | | | | |
| | • | Child Care | 39 | 39.4 |
| | • | Preschool Teaching | 25 | 25.2 |
| | • | Bachelor of Education EC | 3 | 3.0 |
| | • | Bachelor of Education Primary | 3 | 3.0 |
| | • | Other | 10 | 10.2 |
| | • | No response | 19 | 19.2 |
| Currently Enrolled in Further Study: | | | | |
| | • | Yes | 19 | 19.2 |
| | • | No | 71 | 71.7 |
| | • | No response | 9 | 9.1 |
| Job Description: | | | | |
| | • | Child care worker | 26 | 26.3 |
| | • | Preschool teacher | 30 | 30.3 |
| | • | Primary teacher | 1 | 1.0 |
| | • | Administrator | 19 | 19.2 |
| | • | Specialist | 2 | 2.0 |
| | • | Multiple roles | 21 | 21.2 |
| Time Fraction Employed: | | | | |
| | • | Full time | 77 | 77.8 |
| | • | Part time | 14 | 14.1 |
| | • | No response | 8 | 8.1 |
| Early Childhood Work Experience: | | | | |
| | • | Less than 1 year | 5 | 5.1 |
| | • | 1 - 5 years | 41 | 41.4 |
| | • | 6 - 10 years | 16 | 16.2 |
| | • | 11 plus years | 36 | 36.4 |
| | • | No response | 1 | 1.0 |
| Previous Employment History: | | | | |
| | • | No response | 29 | 29.3 |
| | • | Clerical work | 21 | 21.2 |
| | • | Health services | 11 | 11.1 |
| | • | Family | 10 | 10.1 |
| | • | Teacher | 9 | 9.1 |
| | • | Miscellaneous | 6 | 6.1 |
| | • | Shop assistant | 5 | 5.1 |
| | • | Community work | 3 | 3.0 |
| | • | Service industries | 3 | 3.0 |
| | • | Housemother | 2 | 2.0 |

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TABLE 3

1. Importance of ethical concerns in early childhood

| Response | Percentage |
|---|---|
| very important | 58.6 |
| important | 30.3 |
| somewhat important | 9.1 |
| no response | 2.0 |

2. Value of a Code of Ethics for setting professional standards for the Early Childhood Field

| | |
|---|---|
| essential | 41.4 |
| major | 41.4 |
| minor | 14.1 |
| no response | 3.0 |

TABLE 4

Frequency of Ethical Problems encountered in work

| Response | Percentage |
|---|---|
| very frequently | 28.3 |
| sometimes | 46.5 |
| rarely | 17.2 |
| never | 3.0 |
| no response | 5.0 |

TABLE 5

Types of Ethical Issues encountered
(open ended question)

| Response | Percentage |
|---|---|
| Parental conflicts | 26.3 |
| "professionalism" | 16.2 |
| Differences in values | 11.1 |
| Other responses (varied) | 23.2 |
| No response | 23.2 |

## Table 6

### Ethical Issues Most Frequently Encountered

| Rank | Issue | Percentage of Respondents |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | Dealing with requests to treat children in ways you feel are harmful. | 45.5 |
| 2 | Discussing a child or family in a non-professional setting. | 40.4 |
| 3 | Implementing policies that you feel are not good for children because the program requires them. | 39.4 |
| 4 | Knowing that the centre/program is in violation of government regulations. | 33.4 |
| 5 | Giving parents information that they may use in punitive ways with children. | 30.5 |
| 6 | Dealing with conflicting requests from separated/divorced parents. | 28.6 |
| 7 | Discovering from a child that a parent may be breaking the law. | 24.3 |
| 8 | Leaving the room/centre to conduct personal business. | 20.3 |
| 9 | Letting children do an activity that may not be appropriate or worthwhile. | 12.1 |
| 10 | Sharing the nurturing role with male early childhood workers. | 5.0 |

**Table 7**

**Frequency of Ethical Problems Encountered in Work Relationships**

Percentage

| Relationship | Very Frequently | Sometimes | Rarely | Never | No Response |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Staff - Parent | 3.0 | 32.3 | 37.4 | 19.2 | 8.1 |
| Staff - Staff | 1.0 | 33.3 | 35.4 | 22.2 | 8.1 |
| Staff - Administration | 3.0 | 18.2 | 35.4 | 34.3 | 9.1 |
| Staff - Employer | 4.0 | 27.3 | 29.3 | 28.3 | 11.1 |
| Staff - Other Organizations | 4.0 | 11.1 | 26.3 | 47.5 | 11.1 |